

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Augustine?

Every now and again we will take some time to look back at the pages of Christian history. There is so much that can be learned from those who have studied the Bible and have determined for it to be their rule of life. Church history is never superior to bibliology, by no means, but it certainly does aid our understanding of various biblical doctrines today. As we are able to identify how the things that we believe about God today agree with what theologians from earlier centuries have believed about it, we can receive some affirmation for that which we believe, especially as these doctrines are preached and believed today.

The same however is true for lessons that can be learned from church history which should not be repeated. Not everything that happened in the first few centuries after Christ was necessarily good. Instead, quite a few heresies made its way through during the first few centuries after the resurrection of Christ. By far, one of the most telling forces the church has had to contend with during the first few years after Christ's ascension was the heresy of Gnosticism. As can only be assumed, this is what also necessitated the first theologians to combat such heretical thinking that casts undue and unbiblical distinction between the physical and the spiritual realm. Harold Brown (1933:42) suggests that it was the first heresy that led to the first systematic theology. For this reason he points to Irenaeus (ca. 125 – ca. 202) as the first fighter of anti-biblical doctrine. This Greek-speaking Bishop of Lyons took the heresy of his day head on in his "Against Heresies" written in about 180-89. Of this volume Brown (1933:42) says:

"The fact that Against Heresies is so comprehensive is due in no small measure to the fact that the heresy Against which it speaks was not limited to a particular point or doctrine, but was an alternative vision of religious reality spanning a wide range of doctrines. Because of the importance of this work, it is possible to say that Gnosticism is in a sense the stepmother of systematic theology and that a heresy is the stepmother of orthodoxy."

So, from the earliest of times after Christ, the church was plagued by Greek philosophy, but no one with as much influence as Plato, whose philosophies influence Gnosticism. This is where Augustine of Hippo becomes an important figure in church history. As we attempt to wrap our minds around this Roman Catholic Bishop, born 13 November, 354, we cannot make sense of him without giving earnest attention to his platonic upbringing. Like many scholars of his day he was intensely influenced by Plato's views.

1. Platonism and it's terrible effects on theology

Augustine progressed philosophically as most men of his day. Eventually neo-Platonism would have a considerable effect on his thinking, especially as he made sense of God and the created order through these lenses. In his "Confessions" he makes quite clear that a subtle disdain of the physical had started to set in. From his account it seems that it could have been his hatred for his past sinful lifestyle that led him to the false piety of an over-spiritualized view of God and what he grants men. This becomes quite evident in the following:

“By now my misspent, impious adolescence was dead, and I was entering the period of youth, but as I advanced in age I sank ignobly into foolishness, for I was unable to grasp the idea of substance except as something we can see with our bodily eyes. I was no longer representing you to myself in the shape of a human body, O God, for since beginning to acquire some inkling of philosophy I always shunned this illusion, and now I was rejoicing to find a different view in the belief of our spiritual mother, your Catholic Church...”

To be sure, the physical might have been all there was to Augustine, at least as he applied these to the venting of his own sin, but from the beginning of creation, God had always intended for us to worship him within a physically created world. In Genesis 3, when sin enters, is where there came a serious disconnect between the physical and spiritual. But this is something we are reminded that God will again reverse once he makes all things new. As God’s children we will live in a real re-created world here on earth and enjoy real created things in our glorified bodies.

These kinds of Platonic views entered the early church at quite a rapid pace once Augustine rose to prominence as a bishop. Perhaps the thoughts that influenced his hyper-spiritualized eschatology can be identified in his explanation of the created order:

“Whatever was not stretched out in space, or diffused or compacted or inflated or possessing them, I judged to be nothing at all. Yet in so thinking I was gross of heart and not even luminous to myself at all. Yet in so thinking I was gross of heart and not even luminous to myself; for as my eyes were accustomed to roam among material forms, so did my mind among the images of them, yet I could not see that this very act of perception, whereby I formed those images, was different from them in kind.”

It should be no surprise that Augustine’s theology eventually became tainted with the tendency of over-spiritualisation or allegorisation of clear literal texts of Scripture based on this philosophical commitment to Platonism which he made early in his life, allegedly before his conversion.

2. Platonism a vehicle to theology

For Aurelius Augustine, philosophy became the vehicle to theology. As Millard Erickson (1998:41) points out, he “felt that theology can be elucidated by philosophy. He stressed the priority of faith and acceptance of the biblical revelation, but also insisted that philosophy may help us to better understand our Christian theology.” This may be true, in a certain sense. Although philosophy is only true as it agrees with biblical revelation, never the other way around. Augustine very soon, because of his upbringing and certain factors in his life, landed at an overly allegorised view of Scripture. Erickson (1998:41) again reminds that in the philosophy of Plato he found:

“...therein a vehicle for theology. Augustine felt, for example, that the Christian metaphysic, with its concept of the supernatural world of God and the created world that derived from and depends on that supernatural world, might be better understood in terms of Plato’s imagery of the divided line. On one side are the unseen Ideas, which are more real than the sensible objects on the other side. The sensible objects are but shadows cast by these Ideas.”

It is this philosophical approach to the plans of God that certainly influenced Augustine, in particular, in his view about the millennium spoken of in Scripture. This, to be sure, is our biggest concern with Augustine — anti-millennarism.

Disregard for a literal thousand-year reign of Christ is something which he not only thought about, but actually popularised. This is quite obvious from the fact that many of the church Fathers believed in a literal thousand-year reign of Christ, which will be the time of Israel's restoration.

3. The birth of the “Spiritual Vision” model

As can only be consistent with a philosophical commitment to things in the spiritual realm, at the expense of what is physical or material, false views about the promised material world of the end times will abound. This is exactly what occurred under Augustine's tutelage. His commitment to platonic ideas is what eventually lead to the development of a “spiritual vision” approach to the world, heaven, the millennium, and glorification, which is a far cry away from the general consensus of church history.

As MacArthur & Mayhue (2017:830) explains:

“The spiritual vision model elevates ‘spiritual’ realities over physical matters. In this view, a stark dualism exists between the spiritual and the material with the spiritual values more than the physical. Material realities are perceived as bad, inferior, or evil.”

And again, the ties to Platonism becomes quite evident! MacArthur & Mayhue (2017:830) continues by explaining this relationship:

“The spiritual vision model adopts the worldview of the Greek philosopher Plato (ca. 428 – 348 BC) and the philosophies stemming forth from his views. Plato taught the superiority of the spiritual over the material. Religious variations of Platonism often present the soul's escape from the body to a purely spiritual existence as the highest ideal and goal.”

And as has already been noted, “Gnosticism, which was a major threat to the early church, was one form of Platonism. Gnosticism disparaged the goodness of the material world.” So the problem then with Augustine has mostly to do with the issue of hermeneutics. It is no mystery that during his time as a notable theologian the literal-historical view of interpretation was being severely affected by his platonic pre-commitments. But Augustine was not alone in this. Others like Origen also became infected by the tenacity of Plato's dualist ideas. Again MacArthur & Mayhue (2017:830) describes the process by which this occurred:

“While most early Christians were neither Platonists nor Gnostics, Plato's ideas often infiltrated the early church. Origen (AD 184 – ca. 254) came close to denying bodily resurrection. The influential Augustine...believed that the idea of an earthly kingdom of Jesus was carnal and opted for the view that the kingdom of God is a spiritual entity, the church...These two influential theologians downplayed the physical aspects of Bible prophecy and elevated the spiritual.”

4. Christoplatonism is born

The views of Augustine and Origen eventually lead to a kind of ‘Christoplatonism,’ as Randy Alcorn calls it. This was a new way of seeing things by taking the philosophies of Plato and combining them with, for instance, writings of the apostle Paul. In his accurate handling on the subject of heaven, Alcorn (2005:52) poses the question as to people's resistance to a view of heaven as a real and physical place. He insists that the large-scale opposition to biblical doctrines like a physical millennium or a physical final state has mainly to do with the subtle influences of Plato in the form

of Christoplatonism. He refers to the common response some might have in his own personal life. He tells:

“A fine Christian man said to me, ‘This idea of having bodies and eating food and being in an earthly place...it just sounds so *unspiritual*.’ Without knowing it, he was under the influence of Christoplatonism. If we believe...that bodies and the earth and material things are unspiritual, even evil, then we will inevitably reject or spiritualize any biblical revelation about our bodily resurrection or the physical characteristics of the New Earth.”

Alcorn is right. Plato’s false ideas has had far-reaching effects on the way people see all these ‘carnal’ promises from the Lord. Perhaps as a knee-jerk response to the sinful world that we live in, a world that is obviously carnally evil, people sadly throw out the baby with the bath water when they overreact to the world and refuse the idea of a future physical and joyful world that awaits God’s children.

In an appendix to his book “Heaven,” Alcorn takes Platonism right by its ugly, allegorised horns. And he does so by first drawing attention to the fact that Paul wrote his treatise on the resurrection to the Corinthians, which was not a by chance occurrence at all. Paul knew exactly what the situation in Corinth was like. As a society they were entrenched in the dualism of Plato and so the same kinds of dualistic views about the spiritual vs. the physical became proliferated.

What is also alarming about this direction of hermeneutics is the fact that Christianity, which is the only true religion, since the days of Augustine become something more resembling of the Eastern religions, all of whom agree that physical is bad and spiritual is good. Alcorn (2005:459) is not at all blind to this fact. He insists that “this [christoplatonism] has blended elements of Platonism with Christianity, and in so doing has poisoned Christianity and blunted its distinct differences from Eastern religions.” In other words, because of it, the church started to share the philosophies of the world instead of the church insisting on its unique biblical foundations.

5. The odd ones out

As was already stated, Augustine’s theological course could not be any more contrary to that of many early church theologians. His overspiritualised view of the millennium declared him the odd one out among his theological peers. In the book, “Christ’s Prophetic Plans,” in a chapter about the church fathers’ view of the millennium, Nate Busenitz (2012:177-178) quotes Philip Schaff who wrote:

“The most striking point in the eschatology of the anteNicene [i.e., prior to AD 325) Age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertulian, Methodius, and Lanctantius.”

So, if this is the general consensus among the church fathers, then why did things change? You’ve guessed it. A blind commitment to Christoplatonism and one of its most avid supporters, Augustine got the better of many of us. Busenitz (2012:178) continues to motivate his interpretation of church history by pointing out that many contemporary scholars would agree to the fact that the prevailing eschatological expectation of the church in the earliest centuries after Christ was predominantly a

premillennial expectation. In particular, Roger E. Olson is employed who testified to the fact that “Augustine [in the fourth century] developed what has come to be known as *amillennialism*, whereas most of the earliest church fathers were premillennialists.”

In addition, in an entire section dedicated to the rise of amillennialism Busentiz continues to show exactly how this obvious abuse of sound hermeneutical principles became so popular. And it all started there in Alexandria where Origen first opposed chiliasm as, as Philip Schaff puts it, “a Jewish dream.” However, it wasn’t until Augustine that a full-on attack was launched against the premillennial view. Undoubtedly, for this reason, Augustine can be called the father of amillennialism. Busentiz (2012:189) insists that “it was Augustine...who really established Amillennialism as the de facto position of the medieval church. Though he had initially leaned toward the Premillennial perspective, the bishop of Hippo ultimately rejected it because he felt it promoted *carnality* through its emphasis on material blessings in an earthly kingdom.”

But again, this insistence on “carnality” is at best confused. The Bible does indeed heed against the flesh, but this is as we fight sin (Romans 6). The flesh is not wicked on its own. God promised a day in which sin will no longer have its effect on our fleshly bodies. At such a time we would have all been liberated to serve God in our glorified, physical bodies without the hindrance of sin. Speaking for instance of the resurrection, Alcorn (2005:464) encourages that “Every belief that would make our resurrection bodies less physical than Adam’s and Eve’s, or that makes the New Earth less earthly than the original Earth, essentially credits Satan with a victory over God by suggesting that Satan has permanently marred God’s original intention, design, and creation.” Alcorn said this in agreement with Anthony Hoekema whom he quotes to the same effect:

“If the resurrection body were non-material or non-physical, the devil would have won a great victory, since God would then have been compelled to change human beings with physical bodies such as he had created into creatures of a different sort, without physical bodies (like angels). Then it would indeed seem that matter had become intrinsically evil so that it had to be banished. And then, in a sense, the Greek philosophers would have been proved right. But matter is not evil; it is part of God’s good creation...”

And the same applies to a literal and physical future millennium.

6. The “virtual” City of God

Augustine eventually put his thoughts to paper with regards to his view of the millennium. This was laid out in his book “The City of God.” Ironically though, the city that Augustine has in kind was not quite a literal and visible city as one might gather from the title. Rather, his commitment to Platonism arguably hit high gear as he commits uncalled for allegory after allegory in order to punt his view of amillennialism. What is obvious again is that it is his disdain for any form of carnal pleasure that leads him to his persuasion. Busentiz (2012:190) refers to the following for Augustine’s book to make the point:

“This opinion [of a future literal millennium after the resurrection] might be allowed, if it purposes only spiritual delight unto the saints during this space (and we were once of the same opinion ourselves); but seeing the avouchers hereof

affirm that the saints after this resurrection shall do nothing but revel in fleshly banquets, where the cheer shall exceed both modesty and measure, this is gross and fit for none but carnal men to believe. But that they are really and truly spiritual do call those of this opinion Chiliasts.”

Busentiz (2012:190) goes on to question the merits for Augustine’s seemingly trivial reasons for rejecting a literal millennium. Others are likewise convinced about the triviality of Augustine’s change of view. Perhaps again the environment in which he found himself greatly contributed to his disdain of attuning that sounded like a “party” and sent him in a trajectory to where he finally opted to change his view entirely.

7. So how do you solve a problem like Augustine?

Augustine undoubtedly left his indelible mark on the landscape of current biblical interpretation. False views about the millennium or eschatology in general abound as a result of the lingering effects of his “The City of God.” These ideas continued to be propagated by the Roman Catholic Church and has become such a tenacious force that it remained virtually unaltered by reformers such as Luther or Calvin.

So what do we make of him? To borrow from Rodgers & Hammerstein’s 1959 “The Sound of Music,” *“how do we then solve a problem like Augustine?”*

Well, my advice is that we give credit where credit is due, but not at the expense of clear biblical teaching. I don’t doubt the fact that he was truly saved. There is ample evidence of his repentance in his “Confessions” which seems to support this view. Here he made plain the frivolity of his previous life of hedonism and his new course of a dedicated life unto the Lord. What is also clear from church history is the fact that he became a champion for many of the core doctrines that we defend to this very day, and will continue to defend to the day of the Rapture.

Unbeknownst to some may be the fact that he was an avid defender of trinitarianism. This is undoubtedly one of the core tenets of the Christian faith. He expressly believed in the existence of three persons, although distinct, that reign as one. To this effect he declared that whatever is heralded “of God in respect to himself, is both spoken singly of each person, that is, of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and together of the Trinity itself, not plurally but in the singular.”

He also defended monergism in the face of rising Pelagianism and the eventual semi-Pelagianism of the Roman Catholic Church. As Robert Culver (2005:687) explains, the semi-Pelagian view in particular “acknowledges the necessity of divine grace – not restored ability of the will but only special assistance.” This stands in stark contrast to Paul’s view of human depravity that describes people as totally incapable to even desire this change they so desperately need (Eph. 2:1-2). It is exactly at this point that Augustine was careful in his exegesis. Culver (2005:687) says “it has been correctly asserted – Pelagianism says man is morally *well*, Semi-Pelagianism that he is *sick*, Augustinianism that he is *dead*.”

But in his wake also lies a considerable amount of overspiritualised and allegorised carnage as it involves end time prophecy. His “The City of God” has led to an unnecessary moving away from the literal-historical interpretation of such end time prophecy, and for this reason alone, deserves our rejection, let alone our suspicion.